Korana Serdarević, unattached, Croatia - Una Krizmanić Ožegović

The Cranny

“My darling sister, you have a hole in your butt,” Ivka says in all seriousness, as if relating a particularly important discovery. Children giggle and point fingers at the torn up stitching right in the middle of Tona’s round butt.

Tona has just bent over while dragging the wooden stool from the kitchen, and now, broad and strong, she stands up next to the stone table. Villagers let go of their chatting and prick their ears up. There is a smile lurking at the corner of their lips – they know what their Tona is all about. Even now, when you can clearly make out her white panties under the wide, colourful skirt, it doesn’t cross her mind to cover the hole with her hand, let alone feel embarrassed. On the contrary, it’s as if she has been waiting for fancy Miss Ivka to slap that remark in the middle of a hot summer afternoon. Her tiny eyes pop with delight and people know her tongue, so sharp and witty, is half way out to snap back at Ivka.

“First, it’s not a hole, it’s a cranny,” she fires. “And second, what, there’s no cranny in your fanny?!”

The laughter drowns out the crickets scraping their little feet like crazy on the old pines next to the house.

Ivka gawks, petrified for a second or two in that hot air, and then storms into the kitchen. The scene has been played and Tona’s hearty laughter booms as a magnificent bass over the neighbors’ voices.

The whole afternoon passes, everyone retreats to their sweltering houses, and Ivka is not leaving the kitchen. A grave injustice has been inflicted upon her. They think they’re gonna laugh at her?! She is so much more than those people who fold their fishing nets, herd sheep, push and pull donkeys, and scrape fish flanks all day long. Since moving to the city, Ivka has turned into a real lady: she is fashionable, she puts her chin up when she walks, and talks like the town folk. And still, they mock her and throw insults at her that spread around the village like stench of rubbish.

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People have known Ivka since she was wee little, wiping the floors in her mother's kitchen all day long. That's how the old lady delegated chores between her children: the older daughter always washed and cleaned and cooked, while the younger one took the sheep to pasture. That's why Ivka can cook and maintain a household and Tona can't do anything around the house. And she couldn't care less if her braid is thin and messy, just like the dishes in her dirty kitchen.

Ivka still cooks and cleans every day, but now she lives in Zadar. It's no small feat being a widow in a fancy apartment on the town's main street. It's tricky though, because she is left at the mercy of her daughter-in-law and grandson, whom she helps around the kitchen while her son sails the Mediterranean. And, every once in a while, her daughter-in-law sends her off on a "vacation." This is when Ivka, all dolled up in a cloud of perfume, goes to her sister and Tona always takes her in. Tona laughs as soon as she sees her sister dragging the suitcase up the hill on the cracked tarmac. She spreads her arms and cries: "Look everyone, it's the Holy Mary!"

Ivka frowns and makes a beeline from the courtyard to the kitchen, starts lifting the lids off of old pots with a cunning squint.

"My dear sister, what on earth is this? I honestly don't know," she says.

Her fat, braided bun sways disapprovingly at the crown of her head and it seems as though the self-proclaimed Lady of the Ladle has arrived. Tona snorts and goes outside, cursing the goat, the dog, and the donkey.

"Oh, c'mon, why you raisin' your nose so high?! Is allowed, innit, to joke at everyone's expense, includin' yours?" Tona says when she sees Ivka still sulking at the little table packed with unshelled peas.

"You'd better start shellin' those for dinner, don't go sittin' there like a gloomy Gus. A person has to eat somethin'."

"If we are going to eat anything, than I'll have to do some cooking too, not just the shelling, you hear me?!" Ivka cries out and jumps as if she was pinched. However, Tona doesn't hear her. She's already gone through the yard to the other end of the house. In the corridor, she almost bumps into the old lady, Strigina. She doesn't even look at her. She walks around the scrawny figure listlessly and keeps dragging her feet towards the room. The children are awake.

For quite some time now Strigina has been the house ghost. She creeps around the corridors, her old body practically floating. She does not speak to anyone anymore, so no one speaks to her either. Surely, no one misses talking to her too much – Strigina comes from a štriga, a hag, people say. Dressed in black, frowning, ill-tempered, as soon as she opens her mouth, she grumbles and nags about everyone. Mostly about Tona, her big, loud-mouthed daughter-in-law, a spinster that snatched up her only son, that doesn't cook, doesn't clean the house, that mocks everybody. And it's up to you to decide which of her qualities you can despise the most and what it's like living with her while your son is at sea for a second year in a row and only sends green money.

Tona opens the nursery door and finds the boys on the floor in front of the closet. They are throwing around pressed clothes. Ive is gulping his dad's socks, while Josip is stuffing both of his skinny legs into one of his dad's pant legs. Tona quietly laughs and curses at the same time. She gathers the clothes, throws them on the bed and lifts her youngest boy to her chest. As soon as she touches him, her hands nervously glide over his little body. The fever is already weighing on his breath.

"Sweet lord, how in the name of..." Tona murmurs while tucking the fresh quilts on the bed. Ive laughs some more while watching his mother, but after ten minutes he is as flabby as a dead squid and drenched in sweat.

Tona's strong hands quiver with worry as she soaks the wraps in the bathroom.

"What happened, Tona?" Ivka asks, giving her a dirty look, as she stirs a full pot.

The sun has already set in the gulf between the neighbor's house and the walls of the village school, and a couple of women gather in front of the church to spice up their day by flapping their tongues. Every moment or so, they lift their eyes towards Tona's empty courtyard. Tona hasn't come out tonight.

She is sitting by the bed and wrapping her boy's little legs, arms, and chest in soaked cloth. An hour passes, then two, and little Ive is not cooling down. His eyes flicker like the Christmas lights his dad brought from America two years ago. Tona sits by the bed and wonders where her husband is. What shines above his head – the sun or the moon? How many mouths would the news have to cross before he found out his boy was ill? He has never seen him, but he would

worry for sure. He is a good man, takes care of his own. It's easy for them to wait. Anyone can do that.

Little Ive is lying there, exposed, a rash spreading over his chest as if someone has sprinkled scorching water over it. Strigina's thin shadow leans against the green doorway every so often and stares at the daughter-in-law and the boy. She goes to her room a couple of times and sifts the faded rosary beads through her fingers. Finally, she opens the prayer book, and stares at the blissful figure of St. Nicholas.

"Signora Strigina, is Jelka still around, the one who's good with herbs and remedies?" Ivka peeps into Strigina's room and frowns at the mouldy stink. The old woman fires a sullen look at her.

"Dead since last year," she says begrudgingly.

"Dear God..." Ivka whispers and then her eyes catch sight of the saint's face in the old woman's hand.

Time stands still in Captain Zorić's house. The table is still set, but no one is eating tonight. His older son digs through the garden with a soupspoon and rams little snails in the holes. His wife lulls a sleeping child, and his old mother is angled over the prayer book like a dry branch. The wife's sister, the beautiful and proud Ivka, is standing on the veranda alone. Tears roll down her face and carve their wet trails across her cheeks. It's all St. Nicholas' fault, damn him, and his face hanging on the wall. The night they told her that her husband was gone missing at sea, she took down the picture and shoved it furiously in the bottom of an old chest.

"Seas and ships, devil may care," Ivka whispers for the umpteenth time, ruffles the tears off her face, as a ball of salt tumbles in her chest. The sea washes out everything, leaving nothing but rough edges to rust and rot. You cover them with colorful dresses and witty comebacks, you knit stories around them, but the sea disturbs everything, tosses rocks, throws out the past, brings the rubbish straight to your door. Death notifications delivered with a foreign post stamp, diseases ravaging kids on the island and leaving them to die like animals… the sea brings it all.

"To hell with the sea," Ivka says again quietly, "to hell with the sea and the island trapped in it."

"His fever's dropped, he's asleep," she hears her sister's voice behind her back. "Joso will take him to town to see the doctor. We'll sail off before the heat swelters."

Ivka turns around, still choked up. Through the open door, she sees Tona lying on her side of the marital bed. The other pillow, white and tidy, lies next to her like a tombstone. Ivka wants to go into the room and tear it into pieces with her bare hands.

“Come, lie down. Whatcha doin’ out there?” Tona says and turns on her side, facing the wall. Ivka sighs and glances at the dark sea once again. Down there, below the village, it seems like a big, dark cranny.

“Suck it up,” she says and starts unbraiding her thick hair.



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